

Lost and Found by dragonartist5

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Hurt-Comfort, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-11-23 18:26:09

Updated: 2016-12-09 20:25:56

Packaged: 2019-12-17 14:50:07

Rating: T

Chapters: 19

Words: 19,775

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Eleven returns after three months of unbearable darkness. Everything settles back to normal, until a kidnapping changes everything. And things may become stranger still . . .

1. Lost and Found

Nobody says anything. Nobody questions anything about the countless hours he spends alone, on the outskirts of Hawkins lab. Nobody mentions the walkie talking he keeps on the floor beside his bed. Nobody asks about his disappearances. After all, he always turns up hours later, rain-soaked and distraught. Nobody confronts him about his quietness, or the way he seems to be folding in on himself, from guilt or grief or both. They notice, of course.

...

84 days. Not quite three months. He keeps the count in his head, and every day, it drags him farther away from her.

He feels her. Not physically.

She's a shadow, a presence. He feels her in his thoughts, like there's some barrier she is trying to break.

He can feel where his thoughts end and hers begin. It's a beautiful, complex bridge that she's haphazardly constructed over the more recent weeks.

Her presence is a relief. It's unfamiliar, even befuddling, but it gives him hope. Mostly, it just drives him crazy.

She caresses his thoughts as if they are fragile, precious things. He tries to reach out to her, but fails. His boundaries do not stretch far. Hers stretch over several thousand universes.

...

Mike felt her on Christmas morning. For the second time. The blurry happiness of the day made him forget almost completely about her, if only for a few hours. Opening gifts, the heaping plate of pancakes their mom had expertly made, and the prospect of showing off his new gaming system to his friends later that day had him buzzing with excitement.

Mike. The single, whispered word slipped into his subconscious as he

was helping his mom clean up after breakfast. He dropped the plate he was holding as he whirled around, unable to detect where the sound had come from. The blue ceramic shattered across the kitchen tiles.

"Mike! Really?" His mom was on him in an instant, eyes flashing. He didn't register her words, still staring at the floor. The sound he'd heard wasn't really a sound at all, but a *thought*. His name.

"Get a broom, will you?"

He was shaken out of his reverie, but not fully recovered.

Mike. His mind reeled. He managed to make his feet move toward the closet in the hallway, reaching for a broom. It was there, away from everyone, that he felt her. His brain had trouble processing the thought. She was close to him. She was just, *there*.

He began to clean up his mess, methodically sweeping the pieces into a cracked, plastic dustpan.

...

The first time he felt her: In Mr. Clarke's old science classroom, back pressed against wooden cabinets, watching her disappear before his eyes. He'd felt her reaching out. He felt all her anger and fear exploding inside his own chest, throbbing with the beat of his heart. There had been something else, too. And she was gone, shattered.

Mike tried to push the thought from his head, without success.

This time, she'd given him something to hold on to.

A name.

...

After that, he felt Eleven all the time. She was always near. Sometimes, she actively tried to break the barrier. What he got was fuzzy and interfered by his own mind playing tricks. He'd feel a sudden emotion seize him, it's strength overwhelming. Like the time he'd gone to see a movie with Dustin. Inexplicably, he'd had a sort of

panic attack. The fear rose inside him like a monster. He'd begun to tremble. He knew that. Dustin noticed, because Dustin somehow notices everything.

When he was questioned, Mike lied. Claimed he was getting a fever.

It wasn't just fear. Hunger and thirst, and something else. Like longing, though he wasn't sure if it was just his own. Whatever it was, it lived in his chest constantly and tore him apart, piece by piece.

She could get full words through to him. When Eleven spoke, he'd try to answer. He failed. Every single time.

His grades began to suffer. Her voice distracted him from the present. It even distracted him from his friends. They didn't say anything, but he knew they felt his absence. They knew why he'd distanced himself from them. They knew about her. All Mike wanted to do was bring her home.

In the recent weeks, he'd been having dreams. Wandering dreams that morphed into nightmares before he awoke with words on his lips that were not his own. Every night, it was the same.

He'd run through an endless expanse of trees that grew thicker and more clumped together the more he traveled. Every corner, every misty patch of darkness, a voice hid. It taunted him, led him deeper into the unknown. He wound up back in that classroom. He wound up watching her disappear. Every. Single. Time.

2. Snow on the Rooftops

84 days. Not quite three months.

It was Saturday. Lucas and Dustin had finally convinced him to attend another campaign at Will's house. He was, of course, dungeon master. He'd drawn up the campaign last minute, the previous night. It kept his mind off things. As he rode his bike to the Byers' house, he felt the familiarity of her thoughts brushing against his.

Where are you?

He spoke it aloud as well as in his head. As always, there was no response. He didn't have the capacity to make contact with her. It was a one-way sort of communication, and it drove him nuts.

He pedaled down Mirkwood, screwing up his eyes against the wind. It was mid February, and Hawkins was still blanketed with snow. The kind of frozen, unforgiving snow that reminded you Christmas was long gone. The chill bit at his cheeks and nose.

He ditched the bike in Will's front yard, pounding on the door. Jonathan grinned as he pulled open the door.

"They're in Will's room."

"Thanks" Mike hung his jacket on the pegs by the door, stomping the snow from his boots. He walked down the hallway, throwing open the door.

"Wheeler!"

He was met with his friend's overjoyed grins. Lucas mussed up his hair.

"Alright, alright." He cried, allowing himself a smile. Dustin clapped him on the back, pushing him towards the rickety wooden desk they'd dragged to the middle of the room.

"We haven't seen you in ages." Will told him.

"Will, you saw me yesterday." Mike reminded him, laughing. They dropped into plastic chairs around the desk. Mike pulled his haphazard campaign notes out of his pocket, smoothing the papers out on his knee.

"Alright, gentleman." Mike began , clearing his throat.

He remained there long after darkness has fallen. After they'd defeated the Hydra for the sixth time that week, he called time on their game.

"I should be going." He told them, rubbing his eyes.

"Awww, boo." Dustin groaned, pushing back his third piece of pie.

"Sorry, my mom wants me home by ten."

"Same time, same place tomorrow. Alright, Mike?" Lucas said, shooting him a look. Mike rolled his eyes.

"Same time, same place."

The three of them left Will's house, waving to Joyce as they left. She sent them off with a smile, and what was left of the pie. Dustin went his separate way, bidding them a cheerful goodbye. A light snowfall swirled in the beams of light from their bikes. Lucas chattered away about their next campaign, barely pausing for breath. Mike pulled his jacket tighter around him, shivering, though not from the cold.

Mike.

It slipped into his thoughts like a knife through the skin, sharp and swift. Clearer and more agonized than anything he'd felt before. It cut him. A cold fist clenched around his heart. He pulled up short, bike tires slipping a little in the slush. He couldn't catch his breath.

"She's in trouble." He spoke the words before he'd even registered what he was doing.

"Dude, what are you talking about?" Lucas said, coming to clumsy stop beside his friend.

Mike didn't answer. Still fighting to catch his breath, he let the bike handles slip from his fingers. Without thinking, he took off into the trees.

"Mike!" He could hear Lucas calling after him. He didn't care. All that mattered was that El was in trouble. She was *close*.

Closer than she'd been in three months.

"Eleven!" He called out to her. Only the light snowfall and inky darkness answered him.

The air bit at his exposed skin. His socks were soaked in seconds. He trudged through the snow,, fingernails scraping against the tree trunks. Lucas' heavy footsteps followed him.

"Mike! MIKE! Are you crazy?"

He continued to push through the icy banks, breath lodged in his throat. The panic blinded him to anything else. His anticipation mounted. She was so close.

Where are you? He repeated the words. *Where are you?*

"Eleven!" He screamed her name aloud, stopping only to listen.

"Mike." Her voice was weak. Barely audible. The sound tore a hole in him. He froze, turning slowly towards the sound.

The first thing he saw: Her eyes. They were half closed, bloodshot, and empty. It seemed no light emanated from them.

Eleven stood to his left, knee-deep in the snow. She swayed slightly. She began to fall.

Mike caught her, because that's what she'd always done for him. He felt her weight fall against him, head crashing into his chest. His fingers clutched at the torn fabric of Nancy Wheeler's pink dress, now almost unrecognizable.

"El." He said. He noticed her lips, stained blue. He noticed her thinness, the bones of her wrists as they hung limply against him.

"Mike, what the-" Lucas pulled up short, eyes wide. "Is that . . ."

Mike wasn't listening.

"El. El, can you hear me? Wake up. Wake up, it's me. El." Mike felt his desperation mounting. Her breath was shallow, her body deathly cold.

"She needs help."

Lucas, apparently dumbfounded, stood and stared. Mike felt the only thing appropriate to this particular situation. Unreasonable fury.

"Lucas, she needs help!" Tears were pouring down his cheeks now, freezing almost instantly to his face. Gently, he got to his feet, lifting El. She gave no response. All Mike could focus on was the slight flutter of her chest. He tried not to look at the bloodied cuts and bruises that patterned her skin like a multicolored quilt.

They managed to make it out of the trees, back on the road.

"What do we do?" Lucas said.

"We walk, I can't carry her and ride a bike at the same time." Mike snapped. He started to walk, ignoring the numbness of his legs. He'd managed to unzip his jacket and wrap it hazardly around her.

"El. El, come on. Wake up." He said. Her presence was gone. In Mike's mind, there was a void where her thoughts had woven into his subconscious. It left him desperately empty and alone. Her absence scared him shitless. It made the whole thing a thousand times worse.

A thousand years passed with each step. Every step carried them closer to safety, and yet she remained out of his reach.

As they neared his house, Lucas ran ahead, pounding on the door. In a few seconds, a phone call had been made, and Mrs. Wheeler came running out of the house.

She asked no questions, only ushered them inside.

"Get her onto the sofa, Mike." She said, not missing a beat.

"Nancy!" She called.

"Jesus, Mom. What?" The older girl screamed from her upstairs bedroom.

"Get the blankets from off your bed, bring them down here. Now!"

There was a scuffle of footsteps.

"What?" Nancy appeared at the top of the stairs, arms folded over her chest in apparent annoyance. When she caught sight of the lifeless El and tearful Mike, she covered her mouth with her hands.

"Nancy, now!"

Mike laid El down on the sofa as gently as possible.

"We need to get the wet clothes off of her." Mrs. Wheeler said. Mike swallowed.

"Bring me some of Nancy's." Mike hurried off, taking the stairs two at a time. He rushed into Nancy's room and grabbed a sweatshirt and some pajama pants. His mom made him leave the room as Nancy helped her undress Eleven and get her dressed in warm clothes. When he was allowed back in, he helped them wrap her in several thick blankets. She remained limp, lifeless, and barely breathing. Lucas patted him on the shoulder.

"She'll be okay, man." He said, awkwardly. Mike met his friend's gaze, shrugging his shoulders.

"I hope so."

Hopper arrived at their house in less than ten minutes. Mike told him the story as best he could, leaving out the whole telepathic communication bit. He didn't need the Chief carting him off to a mental hospital, that was for sure. Hopper listened, gazing solemnly at Eleven's skeletal form huddled beneath the blankets. Even the Chief, usually unruffled and stoic, seemed rattled by her reappearance.

Her breathing had evened out a bit, a good sign. Mike felt himself

calming down. When he finished his story, he slumped to the floor, back against the sofa so that his head was level with Eleven's. He couldn't seem to keep his eyes off of her.

"Listen, kid. She'll be alright. Hang in there." Hopper said, trying to sound reassuring. Mike allowed himself a weak smile. A moment later, the door swung shut behind the Chief of Police.

Mike refused to leave her side. He argued with his mom for more than twenty minutes before she gave in, letting him sleep on the floor by the sofa. She kissed him goodnight, turning off the light. Mike spent the night listening to her breathing.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fall asleep.

A few hours passed uneventfully. Then, in one terrifying moment, Eleven's breathing stopped altogether. Mike was at her side in seconds.

"Eleven." He said, bending over her. Her breath hitched, and she began to twist and turn, tangled in the blankets.

"El."

She began to scream.

"Eleven! El, it's Mike. It me. Wake up. Please." His voice broke on that last word, physically hurt by the terrible cries emanating from Eleven's mouth.

He peeled the blankets away, catching her bony hands in his.

"El." He squeezed her wrists, tighter. "El, you're okay." She fought harder, trying to wrench herself out of his grasp.

"El! El . ." He sat on the sofa beside her, still holding her hands.

Her eyes flew open. Still, she fought, chest heaving.

"It's me. It's Mike." He told her.

"Mike." She breathed. With the word, thoughts exploded into his

mind, a rush of blurred images he couldn't make sense of.

"Mike." She said again, letting her hands fall. He kept his hold on them. She let her head fall against his chest again, her rattling breaths leaking out of exhausted lungs. It took him a moment to register the fact that she was crying. Her shoulders shook as she choked on the tears, and he wondered how such a small, beautiful thing could make those horrible noises. It enchanted him in an entirely new, awful way.

"You're safe, now." He said, just holding her, not knowing what else to do.

"Mike." It was no longer a strangled cry, but a sigh of relief. She let her body relax, leaning against him.

He tried to find words to say to her, but couldn't. So they sat like that. She remained there, clinging to him. He was comforted by her closeness, because they'd spent the last three months universes apart. Her thoughts hummed inside his head.

3. Pick Up the Pieces

Her nightmares are usually about Papa, because even the Demogorgon scared her less. His silky voice slides into her subconscious. His sandpaper hands and the stench of his cologne and the crinkling of his suit draw their own shadows behind her eyes. The scent of him is enough to make her breath hitch and her heart beat much too fast for comfort. Mostly, she remembers the lies.

He told her he loved her. He told her she was safe. He told her the things she did were magnificent. *Incredible.*

She didn't know what to think, back then. Part of her wanted to believe him. She wanted to accept his touch on the top of her head. She wanted to make him happy. She coveted approval, craved a smile or a sense of *belonging*.

Only now, as she lies listening to Mike's broken voice filtering through the walkie talkie, does she realize it.

He never loved her. She was scum. She was nothing but a lab rat, raised to die at the hands of the bad men in white hazmat suits and noisy masks. Because of him, she will never belong anywhere. Because of him, she has done bad things. She's spilled blood. She has hurt people.

Her breath is lodged deep inside her throat. She tries to speak, but manages only a small choke. She thinks of Mike, and the new beginning he has given her. As long as she is alive, nothing will touch him. It's the least she can do.

She tries for words again. Nothing. Mike keeps talking, barely a whisper. But it's him and his presence means comfort.

He never fails to answer, no matter what time of night the onslaught of memories and evil conjurings interrupt her slumber.

He doesn't make her talk about the nightmares. He doesn't ask any questions.

Instead, he tells her stories.

"El, did I ever tell you how I broke my wrist . ." He would say. She would tell him no, and that was all it took. He'd dissolve into a story that never failed to chase away Papa's shadow.

"El, have I told you the story when Dustin fell into the lake in the middle of a January snowstorm . ."

"What about that time we walked in on Mr. Clarke making out with his girlfriend . ."

She'd focus on breathing, and let his voice soothe away the usual mantra of thoughts that tormented her. He made her feel like she belonged.

"El, are you still there?"

"Yes." Her voice was made only of breath. Not even a whisper.

He talked until he fell asleep again.

"Thank you, Mike."

He didn't hear her. He just knew.

Tonight, it's bad. Really bad. She doesn't scream. Ever. Instead, she drowns in the sheets. Until her own, terrible panic chokes her into waking.

She sucks in a great breath, trembling from head to toe. Her heart hammers against her chest with such speed and intensity she's afraid it's going to burst. In the darkness, she shatters.

She can't breath. She can't breath. She can't breath.

Again, his sandpaper hands and syrupy voice ensnare her. The white tiled floor and cement walls and a constant whisper remind her that she's trapped. She knows nothing outside these walls and locks and metal doors.

She sits up, because it helps her breath. She reaches for the walkie

talkie, still struggling for the words. His voice breathes life into the device before she has time to press the button.

"El." He says, drowsily.

She doesn't answer. He doesn't need one.

"Did you see the stars tonight, El? They're really bright. It's snowing. Look out your window."

She does. Her heart slows. The moon grins. The night sky reminds her of spilled ink, the stars are snowflakes swirling in a cold wind. The tears come when her immediate panic fades into a dull ache.

"We're doing a unit on the solar system in Mr. Clark's class. Today, he told us about the twelve star signs. Zodiacs."

Her fingers still tremble. The tears stain her face. She grips the walkie talkie tighter, hugging it to her chest. She can feel the bulky metal rise and fall with the movement of her lungs as she breathes. In and out. She hears Mike's breath between words. Breaths that keep time with hers.

"Anyway, the star signs are supposed to, I don't know, decide your personality or something. I don't really believe in it, but it's kinda cool."

His words glue her back together. He pauses.

"Still there?"

"Still . . . here." The words are strangled, punctuated by sharp intakes of breath. He senses her unease. He knows there are tears.

"It was really bad this time, huh?" He says. Again, he doesn't need an answer.

"You're here now. You're safe. Did Will show you his drawings from art class? He got the best grade in the class. Nancy told me she wants to take you shopping soon. You can get all your own clothes. Dresses and things."

He takes a breath. She takes one too, deep and even. In. Out.

The trembling stops.

Her heartbeat is less reminiscent of a sledge hammer.

She doesn't have the heart to tell him she doesn't care about dresses.

"El."

"Mmmm?" Her body is no longer drenched in cold sweat. She is no longer drowning.

"I'm glad you're here."

She allows herself a small smile. She knew the meaning of "here".

Here, of course, was in Hawkins. Here was away from the Upside Down. Here was in the grey space where only the two of them existed, voices floating over radio waves at three in the morning.

She lets her eyes slide shut, still clutching the walkie to her chest.

His words glue her back together. She sinks.

After a few moments, her finger finds the button.

"Mike? Still there?"

There's a breath, and a hint of a smile.

"Still here."

4. Call it Love

As promised, Nancy takes her to the mall. Mike comes along, mostly because she refuses to go anywhere without him. The crowds scare her, their voices much too loud and abrasive. Mike holds her hand.

Nancy kindly helps her sort through the racks of clothing. She takes a liking to soft clothes. Deep blues and forest greens. She wears overlarge sweaters that seem to swallow her up. They swath her in warmth and comfort.

But she is skinny. So thin. The clothes seem to weigh her down like the snow laden branches of a frail tree.

"Pretty?"

Hesitantly, she steps out of the fitting room in a frilly dress. For the Snow Ball, she claims, even though the dance has long since passed.

Mike nods and grins like an idiot. Nancy pretends not to notice.

They make their way out of the little square shops inside the mall. Her skeletal form attracts guilty stares. Mike's arm encircles her, quite instinctively. Nancy glares at the passerby, warning off any unwanted attention.

They get lunch in a small café. El is exhausted by the ordeal, arms laden with shopping bags. She wolfs down her sandwich in three seconds flat, and Mike ends up with a depleted supply of french fries.

He catches her levitating them onto her plate. He nudges her, suppressing a laugh, pointing frantically to the security cameras.

They make their way to Nancy's car. El drifts off almost immediately, lulled by the movement of the car. Because of the nightmares. Mike knows. She spends her nights haunted by shadows. He spends his nights telling stories.

...

She is allowed a year.

She can't go to school. Not like this. So she heals. Joyce feeds her three delicious meals a day. In the mornings, she reads childrens books they pick up from Goodwill. In the afternoon, Mr. Clarke stops by a brings her some of his easier science worksheets. Will teaches her to draw. Dustin teaches her the hopelessly knotted stories from the comic books they like. Mike claims he's teaching her the art of storytelling, but mostly he just takes the time to entertain her. She likes his lessons the most.

She absorbs the information, growing increasingly hungry for more. She reads the encyclopedias cover to cover. Mike brings her books from the library. The books themselves grow in size and content matter. On the weekends, she spends time with the boys. They take her into town, to the lake, past the school.

She gains the weight back. Her face is fuller, she grows into her overlarge sweaters. She begins to speak with the house, she rarely lets go of Mike's hand. She's learning, but the world is far bigger than she ever could've known.

The nightmares don't go away. Papa lingers, speaking to her in the dead of night. His memory hangs over her shoulders. She is most vulnerable in the dark. She shatters, but Mike is always there to pick up the pieces.

She learns to love them. All of them. Joyce and Jonathan and Will and Nancy and Lucas and Dustin and Mike. Especially Mike.

They make her feel like she belongs. Finally, she belongs.

She is thirteen years old when they come for her, in late October. She is also very much in love with Mike Wheeler.

Eleven spends her Saturday quietly. In the morning, she eats the towering stack of chocolate chip pancakes Joyce cooks. Jonathan leaves for work, promising to stop by the library on his way home.

Good. She thinks. She'd finished her latest novel just yesterday. El is always on the lookout for new reading material.

Without any more books to bury herself into, she joins Will in his

room. He plays Jonathan's new mixtape, and the siblings find themselves bobbing their heads to the beat. Will grins. El starts giggling uncontrollably. The normalcy feels so good.

In the afternoon, the two ride to Mike's house. His face lights up when he sees them. He leads them inside excitedly, rushing down the stairs to the basement. Dustin and Lucas are already there, halfway through a pizza.

"Byers! El!" They exclaim, through full mouths. El laughs.

"Hello!"

Will bounds over, grabbing a piece.

"Want one, El?" Mike says, grinning. She nods.

She settles down beside Lucas, stuffing her face.

"We got a big day ahead of us, guys." Dustin says.

"What are you talking about?"

"My friend, I am talking about the journey that awaits . ." He says, exaggerating each word.

Lucas rolls his eyes.

"What journey? I was under the impression that we were gonna sit here all day and play on Mike's Atari system."

"Of course not! We are going to the woods."

"The woods?"

"Yeah, like where we found El."

"Why?"

"Because it'll be fun. Trust me."

El watches their conversation bounce back and forth.

"I guess we've got nothing better to do." Mike says, wedging himself next to El.

A few moments later, they are perched atop their bikes, riding down the street. The wind stirs the dead leaves so they skitter and dance around them.

El had received her own bike earlier that month. She found riding it to be pretty easy. The feeling of the cold air biting at her cheeks and the sound of their tires slicing through the puddles and dead leaves cast a sort of trance over her. She loved the freedom.

Mike watches the grin spread across her face and feels a sort of giddy exhilaration building in his chest. They speed down the road, challenging each other to go faster and faster.

Faster.

The word is delicious on her tongue. She feels the throbbing of her heart and the perfect coordination of each muscle in her body and the satisfaction of deep breaths bursting from full lungs.

They ditch their bikes by the road, trudging through the woods on foot. They spend the rest of the afternoon down by the lake. They gather sticks to build a fort. When Dustin pushes Mike in the lake, all thoughts of the fort are forgotten. The boys peel of their shirts and jump in. Even El wades in the water hesitantly.

It's cold. Really cold. It numbs her limbs. Her heart hammers in her ears. Lucas splashes her playfully. She sends water back in his face, laughing as he coughs and sputters. Mike pushes Dustin's head under.

"Be careful." El warns, shivering a little. Will rolls his eyes at them, shooting her a grin.

It's too cold to stay in the water for long. They clamber out, gooseflesh crawling over their skin.

"Well, that w-was a s-stupid idea." Dustin shivers, pulling on his dry t-shirt. Darkness falls fast, like blinds drawn over a window. They make their way up the hill. Mike throws his jacket over El's shoulders. In return, she grabs his hand. She feels him relax a little,

moving closer to her, leaning his temple on the top of her head. The shared space between them is warm. She pushes against him mentally, too. Her thoughts are playful, teasing. She can see the grin creeping onto his face, and suppresses a small laugh.

Eventually, she lets her mind wander with his, half in the boys' conversation, half in their own. She loses track after a while, content to stay in his subconscious warmth.

Mike is sort of oblivious. El doesn't quite know what to think, other than it means safety and comfort.

It is more than friendship. You could call it love.

5. Gone

They hop on their bikes, taking off down the road. The cloud cover makes it darker, harder to see.

"Oh man, my mom's gonna kill me." Mike complains. They take the turn too fast.

A car screeches to a halt. Mike brakes hard, thrown over his handlebars. Instead of hitting the asphalt, he floats two inches from the ground, before landing softer. The others stop, too, a little more carefully. El wipes the blood from her nose impatiently.

"Thanks, El." Mike gasps, getting to his feet as all four doors of the car swing open. Five men exit the car. El squints in the darkness, feeling a steely cold settle in her stomach. They're armed. The others notice it a few moments later.

Too late.

They're surrounded. Two of them grab El from behind. She twists and kicks, feeling the blood surging to her head.

"NO!" Mike whirls around, rushing at them with fists clenched. Before he can make it more than two feet, another man grabs his arm, forcing him to the ground.

"Let him go." Eleven growls. She is strangely calm. Her heartbeat pounds in her head like a drum. She tastes the blood.

The man holding Mike launches back several feet. He hits the curb with a *crack* and remains there, motionless.

She feels the familiar pressure between her eyes and the stream of blood, pouring into her mouth, staining her teeth. She's powerless to stop it.

The two men holding her captive cry out in pain as the bones in their arms shatter. They fall to the ground, writhing in pain.

Her vision grows fuzzy and dark. She feels herself swaying on the

spot. As Mike rushes forward to catch her, he is yanked backward by the hair. She feels her lips move, reaching for him. The man drives a fist into the side of Mike's skull. He crashes to the ground, unconscious. She hears screaming and wonders if the sound is coming out of her own mouth.

The other man steps forward, dragging her towards the car. Will and Dustin run towards them. They're not fast enough.

She hears the doors shut and the screech of tires as the car lurches forward. She catches a glimpse of Mike's unconscious form, lying on the asphalt, before the darkness consumes her vision. She blacks out.

The first thing he feels is the throbbing of his head. A sharp pain blooms behind his left eye, on the side of his head. His muscles feel like lead. He tries to move his fingers, opening his eyes. He hears Dustin shouting in the distance.

"Mike?"

Lucas' face swims into his spotty line of vision. His face is weary, etched with concern.

"Mike, are you okay?"

He tries to respond to his friend, to reassure him, but his voice seems to have stopped working. He mumbles something unintelligible, reaching up to touch his head. Dustin's shouting grows fainter still. Mike attempts to sit up. Immediately, his surroundings spin. His stomach lurches and he turns his head, vomiting onto the asphalt. Lucas pats his back.

"It's alright, man. You're gonna be okay."

Then he remembers.

The memory falls into his head like a brick dropped from the window of a ten story building.

Eleven.

They took her.

She's gone. Again.

Once again, Mike tries to push himself upright, but Lucas forces him down.

"Sit still. You're hurt. Bad. Really bad, dude. You need to chill."

"Eleven." He gasps. Struggling against Lucas' hand on his shoulder.

"Eleven. Where is she? Where'd they take her?" Mike feels tears fighting their way out of his already swollen eye.

"Eleven." Her name is a strangled cry on his lips. His chest aches. The injury to his head is not helping.

Lucas stares at him, biting his lip. Mike shivers.

"Dustin followed them."

Mike shakes his head frantically. How stupid. It causes a fresh wave of pain to steal over him. His thoughts are syrupy and slow, as if his whole brain is coated in thick molasses.

"No, not safe. Has . . . to . . be me." Mike says. "Not safe."

Lucas shakes his head.

"You really are an idiot. Of course it's not safe. That doesn't mean that you get to be the hero, either. You shouldn't go rushing off to save the day every time someone pulls a gun on Eleven. We tried to tell Dustin the same thing. He wouldn't listen."

Mike grabs Lucas' wrist.

"Have to find her. We have to. She's not safe. They're going to hurt her. Lucas, I-"

Lucas shakes his head at Mike's lack of inhibition.

"I know. You love her, or whatever. She's our friend too, Mike. We're going to figure this out. Together." He emphasizes the last word.

"You look terrible." Lucas' eyes travel over Mike's busted face.

Mike takes his hand away from his head. His fingers come away slick with blood. His vision swims in and out of focus. Every breath hurts as it leaves his lungs.

"Mike, stay awake." Lucas says, shaking him a little.

"Will went to get help. You need to stay awake."

Mike bites his lip, tasting the blood on his tongue. He hears the scraping of bike tires.

"Dustin." Lucas breaths.

Mike opens his eyes to see Dustin's panting, worried face in the near darkness.

He throws his bike down, running to Mike's side. Mike doesn't have to ask the question burning in all their minds. Dustin lets his head hand. There are tears staining his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, man. I wasn't . . . wasn't fast enough." Dustin wipes his nose on his sleeve, blinking his eyes repeatedly.

"She's gone, Mike."

6. You've Got Us

Mike's mom drives up ten minutes later. She rushes to Mike's side, closely followed by Will and Nancy.

"I have to get him to the hospital." She says, biting back tears. She strokes her son's hair.

"Hey, mom." Mike says, weakly.

"Oh, baby. You're gonna be okay." She says, a little tearfully. She turns to Lucas.

"Give me a hand?" Together, they hoist Mike to his feet. He bites back a gasp of pain. As gently as possible, they lay him in the back of Mrs. Wheeler's car. She turns to the boys.

"I called the Chief. He should be here any minute. He'll take you home. And don't you dare go after Eleven. Do I make myself clear?"

They nod, exchanging glances.

Nancy hangs back as Mrs. Wheeler climbs into her car. She bites her lip, tears springing in her eyes. Without thinking, she pulls all three of them into a hug. They cling to each other.

"We're going to find Eleven." She says, quietly.

"Promise."

. . .

Mike wakes in the hospital with fire behind his eyes and her name on his lips. The usually blinding lights of the hospital have been dimmed. The curtains are drawn. Somebody's placed his walkie talkie by his bedside table.

His mother sits, fast asleep, in a chair in the corner. He reaches to touch his head, brushing his fingertips over the bandages. The smaller cut across his cheek has been stitched. He winces at the sting. His chest still aches, and he can't tell if it's from his confrontation

with the bad men or the sheer amount of guilt that settles in his heart.

Eleven is gone, and it's his fault. He was supposed to protect her.

The worst part is her mental absence. It's the equivalent of a missing limb. He catches himself continuously seeking her presence. She's gone, her thoughts like static. It's the worst feeling in the world.

His mind races. After "The Incident" last November, the lab had been shut down. Destroyed. Brenner was dead. That much he knew. He'd seen the body. Anybody that Eleven didn't kill were arrested, put on trial, and eventually imprisoned. Or so he thought. Even if there were still some of them left, where could they possibly go? What were they doing with her, and more importantly where were they taking her?

His stomach turns. He thinks back to the nightmares that El has to endure. Over the past year, he's gathered bits of information about her past. She's hesitant to speak of it, and he can only imagine how much it haunts her. He would never ask her to talk about it. When she does share with him, he knows it's extremely hard for her. It is nothing less than an act of trust, something precious. Everything she says makes him want to cry or hug her or punch fucking Brenner in the face for everything he did to her. Possibly all three at once.

Where is she?

The question repeats itself, bouncing around his head like mantra. His mother stirs in the corner. Her eyelids flutter, and she smiles when she sees him.

"Hey, baby. How're you feeling?"

"Okay." He lies, as she gets up and crosses the room. She takes a seat in the chair closest to his bedside, enclosing his hand in both of hers.

"Eleven?" He says. She gives him a sad smile.

"We don't know where she is, honey. The Chief is doing everything he can. Mike, I'm sorry."

Mike turns away, biting his lip. He refuses to cry. Not here, in front

of his mom.

His mom kisses his scraped cheek.

"Get some rest, Mike. I just wanted to see your eyes, sweetheart."

She gets up.

"I'm going down to get something to eat."

When she leaves, Mike picks up the walkie talkie, tapping into the controls.

"Eleven? Are you there? El?" He says. He is met with empty static and a broken promise.

"If you're there, El, listen to me. I'm going to get you out of there. Just hang on." Mike feels the tears threatening to spill over his lashes.

"Hang on. I'm coming."

When Mike hears footsteps coming down the hall, he carefully replaces the walkie talkie and turns away from the door, burying his head in the sheets. His mom leans over, kissing his bruised forehead one more time, before returning to her chair in the corner. He pretends to sleep.

Mike is released from the hospital the following morning with bruised ribs, a fractured eye socket, and a concussion. He is given heavy painkillers and ordered several days of bedrest. His mom threatens him with several cruel and unusual punishments before he finally gives in and trudges up the stairs to his room. He does it for her peace of mind more than anything else. He knows she will never follow through with her sarcastic death threats, but still.

So he lays in bed, alternating between fiddling with his walkie talkie, stuffing his face with snacks his mom brings from the kitchen, and thinking about El. His friends visit after school, bringing him make up work and filling him in on the day's events. When Dustin brings up Troy, they all dissolve into laughter. The kid hasn't gone within a twenty foot radius of them since last November.

They find him on the couch in the basement, devouring a sandwich and working on a new campaign. It's not as expertly crafted as it should be, considering how much time he's had. They tumble down the stairs, one after another. He forces a smile. It doesn't fool any of them.

"When are we gonna go after her?" Lucas blurts out the question on everyone's mind.

"What?"

"Don't play dumb with us, Mike." Lucas snaps, rolling his eyes.

Mike opens his mouth and closes it again, averting his eyes.

Lucas shakes his head.

"Just drop the crap, man. We're gonna get her back."

Mike stares at him, suddenly angry.

"We? There's no *we*. I'm supposed to be the one to get her back. I don't want you guys getting hurt."

Dustin gives an exasperated sigh, his breath ruffling the curls that fall over his forehead.

"Dude, you got it all wrong. Of course there's a *we*. We're her friends too. Just because she's your girlfriend or whatever doesn't mean you get to go and get yourself killed. *We* are all going to get Eleven back. We're going to do it together and we're going to do it right."

Mike searches for a counter argument, but fails. Dustin's right, as much as he hates to admit it. Heat rises in his cheeks.

"I guess you're right."

Dustin steps forward and puts an arm around his shoulder.

"Cheer up, Mike."

Mike sighs.

"I'm sorry." He looks around at the three of them, his best friends, and feels a real smile creeping onto his face.

Lucas chuckles.

"At least you've got us."

7. Static

In the days that follow, the boys discuss a plan to hunt down the bad men. They meet at Dustin's place, pouring over maps and taking notes. Mike brings his D&D binder, scouring it for the tiniest bit of information that might help them.

Though none can think of anything too remarkable, at least they have a place to start. They configure the street where the car stopped them, and the direction they were headed. Mike, insistent on setting out to find her as soon as possible, suggests they leave that very same night.

"Are you crazy?" Dustin says, incredulously. Mike frowns, obviously irritated by his friends' lack of enthusiasm.

"You may be okay with running after El in the pitch black darkness, but I'm not. Plus, we're not even ready. Our plan is mediocre at best, but it'll probably send us running straight into the bad men. Or worse. We don't even know if the demogorgon is dead!"

"It's dead! El killed it. It broke into a million pieces, remember?"

Dustin shakes his head.

"Yeah, and so did El." He pauses, staring at Mike with wide eyes.

"Mike, El broke into a million pieces and turned up three months later, all fine and dandy!"

Mike is shaking with anger. Anger that is hopelessly misdirected, but still.

"She was *not* fine." He hisses, through gritted teeth.

"But she was alive. Anyway, all I'm saying is that we need more time to prepare. You know it. We all know it. Right guys?" Dustin looks around at Lucas and Will.

"He's right. We go when we're ready." Lucas says, rolling his eyes.

Will nods in agreement, exchanging a glance with Dustin. Mike bites his lip, frustrated, heat rising in his cheeks.

"You must've been hit in the head really hard."

Mike looks at Dustin, stung.

"You think I'm insane?" He snaps, with so much venom Dustin blinks in surprise.

"What?"

"You know what. You think I'm insane. You think I'm completely crazy for wanting her back."

Dustin tries to backtrack, stuttering. Lucas jumps to his defense.

"He never said that, Mike."

"Oh, you too Lucas? I know. I get it. You think I'm crazy and you're scared. You're scared of the bad men and you're scared of her. You never liked her anyway. You called her a freak."

Lucas opens his mouth. Mike beats him to it.

"You never cared about her." Mike says, dully. "You're all cowards."

His voice is sharp and cold, but as soon as the words leave his mouth, he regrets them.

Mike glares at his friends, trying and failing to suppress the anger and frustration that boils so close to the surface. With shaking fingers, he hikes his backpack onto his shoulder and turns, wrenching open the door.

He sprints down the steps, swallowing the hot tears that spring in his eyes. The door swings shut behind him. The loud slam makes him cringe. He's too angry to dwell on it, though. He swings a leg over his bike, stealing a glance back. The three of them stand in the doorway. He catches sight of their expressions and immediately wishes he hadn't.

He rides blindly, not really thinking about where he's going. Tears blur his vision, and he relies on memory alone to guide him through the winding streets of Hawkins. He doesn't notice his house on the horizon, doesn't remember rushing through his front door.

Somehow, he winds up sitting at the foot of his bed, head in his hands. It's the first time he's actually broken down since the bad men took El. It's a miracle he's held on for that long. Terrible guilt and fear for her create a bitter storm of emotions that do nothing but confuse him.

He doesn't just cry for El. He cries for his friends, and the irreparable bonds he'd just severed.

The sobs wrack his body. His throat is raw, and his nose runs continuously. Eventually, he's reduced to a violent fit of hiccups. They punctuate his attempts to take deep, steady breaths.

He pulls himself together enough to get off the floor. He crosses the room, picking up the Super Com from where it sits on his bedside table. He taps into the controls. Lucas' voice filters through the station.

"Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. C'mon man, I know you're there. Pick up. Mike!" He turns it off, biting his lip. All the anger he'd had bottled up inside him is gone. Like a deflated balloon, he's empty and numb. Mike chokes back another sob.

Now he'd really fucked up. His own words echo in his mind.

You think I'm insane. You never cared about her. You're all cowards.

Lies.

None of it is true, and Mike knows it. Of course, he had to open his fat mouth and screw everything up.

Still, he can't bring himself to reply. What would he say, anyway? He can't apologize. The damage is done.

His mind wanders to Eleven. Probably locked in some dark cell, beaten and tortured and forced to do awful things. How could he

have let this happen?

He tries to reach out to her, mentally. Sometimes, she reaches out to him. He's not sure how well it works the other way around. It's been eerily silent ever since she left. It leaves an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Eleven?

Tentatively, he pushes on the mental barrier that houses the flow of consciousness that wanders between them. Radio silence. It's like she's there, but asleep. At least he can feel her.

He allows himself a small smile.

"I'm coming."

He says it aloud.

He joins his family for dinner, preoccupied with plans to get El back. He tosses the ideas around, shoveling spaghetti into his mouth. Nancy shoots him a questioning look, and he averts his eyes. They're puffy and red, no doubt. He focuses on his plate and avoids conversation.

"Mike, honey, are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm just a little tired. Can I go upstairs?" He asks her.

"Of course."

As he makes his way upstairs, the guilt overwhelms him for a moment. Once again, he sees Dustin's face, etched with concern. He sees Lucas, mouth wide in shock. And Will. Hurt, reproachful. He pushes the image away. He'd try to apologize to them tomorrow. He'd fix this, and they'd get El back. Together.

...

It comes in the middle of the night. A piercing scream. It echoes in the walls, in his own head.

The walkie talkie crackles, humming with static. Mike blinks,

disoriented in the darkness. He's able to locate the device, pulling it close to him.

"Hello?"

He's sure the scream came through it, though the echo in his head is as real as anything.

"Mike." Eleven speaks through the walkie talkie.

"Mike!" This time, his name is a scream. There's terrible coughing, a great gasp of air.

"El!" He says, gripping the walkie talkie with white knuckled, his heart hammering.

"El. Listen to me. Tell me where you are." He says.

She coughs again, sniffing. More static. Mike's bedside lamp flickers.

"Don't know. Dark. Took me . . . car. Birch Street . . I saw . . sign. There's . . . river. I don't think . . . Hawkins. Not Hawkins."

The lamp continues to flicker, off and on.

"El! El, tell me more."

"Mike." She says his name.

"Town . . not Hawkins. River . . . Riverside."

"Riverside? El, El please. Stay with me."

"Mike. Can't stay . . . long. Not very long. Mike . . bad men. It . . . hurts."

Her words cause him physical pain. He feels that too familiar ache in his chest. like someone had driven a sledgehammer right through him.

"They're hurting you? El, talk to me. Please."

He can hear her shuddering breath. He feels his heart throbbing. The

walkie talkie is inches from his face. He feels as if he could climb right through it and bring her back. But he can't and she's in danger and it's all his fault . . .

"It . . hurts. Hurry. Mike . ."

Her voice disappears, cut short. Only quiet static remains. Mike's grip on the thing loosens, and it lies defeated in his hands. He is reminded of a lifeless bird, crooked wings and dead weight. The lamp goes out, and he is once again bathed in darkness. With trembling fingers, he fiddles with controls, trying to establish the connection. No luck.

He throws the blankets off of him, pulling on his shoes and jacket. He picks his backpack up off the floor and begin stuffing it with a flashlight, extra batteries, his trusty wrist rocket, and his walkie talkie. Risking the kitchen, he stuffs an energy bar, some beef jerky, and a bottle of water in the pack. He heads down the basement steps, breath lodged in his throat. He hesitates, for a moment, before opening the door.

No turning back. He reminds himself. She's in trouble.

The October air stings his cheeks. Mike grabs his bike and sets off down the road.

He sucks in a breath, letting the chill set his nerves on fire. He pedals furiously,

Mike bites his lip as he rounds another corner. His head throbs, even now.

It's not his head that bothers him, but the nights' eerie silence. It reminds him all too much of last November's "incident". The pavement is wet. The sky is cloudy, and Mike Wheeler tries to ignore the steel ball of worry and fear wrapped up inside him.

Riverside is not far. A little over twenty miles. It's north of Hawkins. He'd been there with his family, out to dinner or to fish with his dad. He's there in two hours.

Mike's watch reads 3:24 AM. He blinks the blurriness from his eyes, watching his breath condense against the inky black sky. He slows a

little, muscles aching and body heavy with fatigue.

In the darkness, he squints to make out the street signs.

Mulberry. Chelsea. Redding. He takes another turn, and the road takes him out of the neighborhood and out along the edge of town. The trees grow thicker, and dead leaves slide across the street, billowing in the wind.

There's no one around.

He continues for another mile or so, stopping to drink water or to read a sign. His walkie talkie stays silent, about as helpful as an empty box of Eggos. Mike tries and fails to establish a mental connection. He's forced to accept the truth: She can't help him. She's gone and it's his job to find her. Alone.

With another, awful stab of guilt, he recalls Dustin and Lucas' words.

We're going to find Eleven. Together.

Together. It's the first time he's really stopped to think. Now, he's kicking himself for running blindly into the night. He really is crazy. Stupid.

He chews on his lip, looking frantically at the houses in the distance and the dense foliage on his left. He couldn't believe she'd be out here, in the middle of nowhere. They had to have some fancy building, right? Some underground lab or something.

"Birch Street." He says it aloud, stopping at the corner. Birch Street. Hadn't El said something about Birch Street?

He's sure of it.

He turns down the street. The trees and brush continue on either side. He can hear the sound of rushing water. There's a small building a little way down the street.

He brakes, tires screeching over the pavement. He pulls the flashlight from his pack and jumps off the bike. Shining the light in the foliage, he continues on foot down the street.

"El?" He calls.

"Eleven? Where are you?"

He feels stupid. She's not here.

A twig breaks behind him. He turns, startled. There's a sharp pain in his head. Then nothing at all.

In the earliest hours on a Sunday in late October, 1984, Mike Wheeler disappears. There's a the dull thud of a body hitting pavement. There's the muffled voices of dark clothed captors. There's a flash of headlights and the squealing of tires.

There are no witnesses. Nobody notices the second vanishing in less than a week.

...

I should have clarified. Nobody notices his disappearance until some hours later.

Dustin, Will, and Lucas will wake up on a cloudy Sunday morning to their best friend's absence.

They will find his disturbed bed and missing bike. They will know exactly his intent.

This time, they will tell the Chief of Police. And then they will attempt to go looking for him.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

8. Puppet

Eleven doesn't recognize the place, though the cramped room where they keep her is similar to her cell back in the Hawkins Lab.

It's called the Exploratorium. She caught glimpses of it as they carried her in here. She saw big, dark rooms with high ceilings. There were signs on the walls, and a big display of slowly revolving planets. Apparently, it used to be a museum, open to the public. Until it wasn't.

It's the kind of thing Mike would've loved.

It is her prison.

The bad men stick food through a little slit in the wall. It's a foot wide and four inches tall. Meals twice a day. Soup and some bread. A sandwich. One time, it's half an apple.

How disappointing.

She wolfs it down, knowing she must keep her strength up.

There's a toilet in the corner, and a small bed. She is provided a hospital gown, but it lies folded and untouched at the foot of the bed. Just looking at it sends panic shooting through her chest. Instead, she wears the same rain-soaked jeans and Star Wars t-shirt. They're still damp and muddy, but anything is better than that vile thing.

She keeps Mike's jacket hidden under the mattress, the only thing left of that surreal year, when somehow everything was good and she felt like she *mattered*.

El understands now. She was never meant to have all that. She was never deserving of any of it. This is where she belongs. In the room with lights that sting her eyes and next to no contact with anybody. She's a monster. She's too dangerous to be let out of her cage.

No. Something inside her rejects that notion.

That can't be right. Because once upon a time there were people who

cared about her. There was a boy who gave her a name and his friends who gave her comic books and Nancy who gave her clothes and Joyce who gave her a home and kisses on the forehead before bed.

She hides the jacket. Even though it's pointless to hide anything. They are watching her every move. She stares at the camera, dares it to say something.

The days blur together. She sleeps. She eats. She thinks about her boys, mostly Mike. She's convinced that nothing in the world makes her feel as good as just listening to his voice. She tries hard to erase the image of his body on the asphalt. Guilt gnaws at her from the inside, leaving a bad taste in her mouth. It's her fault.

She seals the barrier between them, to protect him. She shuts him out, and though she hates it, she knows it's the last thing she can do to keep him safe. He doesn't deserve to feel the things she feels here. She's caused enough pain already. It will be her last act of good in the world. Thinking about it like that, it's a little easier.

The questions come a few days after her kidnapping. First, they lead her to a separate room. She is handcuffed, blindfolded. Several guns are trained on her back. She swallows the familiar flutter of her heart and does as she is told. She takes a seat, feeling the hard metal of the chair against her back. The blindfold comes off. The men with guns don't go away. Papa's shadow smiles at her from the corner.

She forces herself to hold their gaze, pushing all signs of fear from her face. She hides behind an emotionless mask.

A man enters, with a clipboard and a small, plastic device. A voice recorder, she guesses.

He doesn't sit, as Papa always did. Instead, he hovers along the opposite wall, not daring to get too close. El lets herself enjoy his fear.

"Hello, Eleven." He says. She doesn't recognize him. He's middle aged, with angular features, a thin mouth. His eyes are the most unsettling. They are a piercing shade of silver, sharp and cold and unforgiving.

"Hello." She says. Her voice is ragged with inuse.

"I know what you must be feeling. I understand." He says. She fights the strange urge to laugh. She raises an eyebrow, incredulous. He ignores her.

"I am here to help you." He says, smiling. The manic grin does not reach his eyes.

"No." She says.

"No?"

"You're going to hurt me." She tells him, calmly. Now is the time to be brave.

"My dear, I assure you I am not going to hurt you. You are burdened by foolish, childish thoughts. Nothing more." He pauses, folding his hands under his chin.

"I don't want it to be this way, but alas, we must proceed with our work. You do remember your success, don't you? You remember the incredible things you did."

El doesn't respond, waiting for him to go on. He clears his throat, silver eyes searching her face.

"We're going to start with small things." He says. One of the armed men shuffles forward, placing an empty glass bottle on the table.

"Eleven, I want you to break it."

She stares at him for a few moments. The plan is unfolding. A brilliant plan. A plan to return to square one. For a moment, she's dumbfounded, trying to wrap her head around the ridiculousness of it all. They plan to repeat their mistakes, and for what? What price are they willing to pay?

Her breathing quickens. She will not roll over and submit to them. She'll fight, even if it kills her, because a million years ago a boy named Mike Wheeler taught her she was more than just an experiment.

She finds the familiar flow of energy, letting it fill her up. The handcuffs break and fall to the ground. She stands and reaches for the bottle. She picks it up with her hands, turning it over in her fingers.

"Eleven . . ."

She lets the bottle fall. It shatters upon the tiled floor.

"Eleven." His voice is angry, but beyond that, there's tension and fear. His spinal column shatters like the glass of the bottle. He falls like a marionette with its strings cut.

The men rush forward. She feels a sharp pain as they inject something into the back of her neck, and her vision blurs. She tears her eyes away dead man's silver gaze and falls forward, into warm and welcoming darkness.

. . .

Everyday, they bring Eleven into the room. Everyday, she refuses to cooperate. They result to torture. She numbs herself to pain, grits her teeth and waits it out. She must save her energy. Through the beatings and electric shock, she hides behind her own mental barriers. And she's making progress.

The bad men become short-tempered and frustrated. The beatings become less frequent and short lived. They are getting nowhere. They are running out of options.

She bites her lip, trying to keep the manic smile off her face. They toss her into the cell for the second time that day. Her ribs ache. Tears glitter on her pale cheeks. Tears that were simply beaten out of her. Her lip is split and puffy, and her heart throbs, beating like the wings of a strangled butterfly. Yet, she smiles as she wipes the tears off her face. She's winning.

El curls up on her bed, trying to slow her heart. She glances around, and a large screen catches her attention. It's a sort of computer, sitting upon the bedside table. It definitely wasn't there before. She slides off the edge of the bed, creeping closer to the blank screen. She

reaches out to touch it, and it hums to life.

There's a movie on the screen. Well, not a movie, but a fuzzy video. El sees an empty room, but the picture is grainy and it's hard to make out the words. She stares at it for a few minutes, waiting for something to happen. When nothing does, she returns to her perch on the bed, burying her head in the paper thin sheets.

Eleven wakes with a start, breathing heavily. She slept only a short while, and she's unsure what woke her. Across the room, shapes move on the screen. She hears muffled voices coming from the video tape. El realizes it must be live surveillance.

She leaps up and peers at the people on camera. Bad people. Two large men, gripping the arms of a smaller form. He could be her age. She looks closer, curious, as the boy kicks and struggles against their grip. He turns toward the camera, and El's heart jumps into her throat.

It's Mike.

"El!" He's screaming. "Let her go. Let her go, you bastards. Where is she?" His voice is ceased abruptly as he sustains a punch to the throat. El watched, panicked, as Mike is sprawled across the floor. One of the bad men's foot swings out, striking Mike in the side. He raises his fists, trying to ward off their attack. Clumsily, he gets to his feet.

"You can't do this. Let her go!" His voice is ragged. El's eyes brim with tears. She grips the computer screen with both hands, white-knuckled.

"El!"

"Mike." It's barely a whisper. Her voice trembles. The sight chokes the air from her lungs. How could this happen? What is he doing here?

"Shut your mouth, you little bastard." One of the men growls, hitting Mike again with a closed fist. El can feel her own fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her palm as she her hands curl into fists. She watches his blood splatter across the floor. For a brief moment, he

looks as if he's about to throw a punch, but he simply reaches up to wipe the steady flow of blood leaking out of his nose. It smears across his cheek.

"Don't hurt her. Let her go. Let her go!"

The larger of the two men laughs, his face twisted into an ugly grimace. He wipes his knuckles methodically on the tail of his shirt. Without another word, they shuffle out the door. El jumps as the door slams, the sound of it loud through the speaker in her own cell.

She's sobbing now, and fat tears roll freely down her cheeks. She watches Mike sway on the spot, before taking a tentative step forward. He starts pacing the room, feeling the walls with his hands.

"El! Eleven!"

She shakes her head, her voice tripping over the ugly sobs that wrack her body.

"Mike!" She yells it. Of course, he doesn't hear her. She cannot bring herself to tear her eyes away, taking him in. The sight of his battered body, the sound of his voice.

Eventually, he slumps down, leaning back against the wall. She can hear his labored breathing. Suddenly, all the fight goes out of her. She sinks to her knees, clutching her arms tight across her chest.

She can't believe it. It's not possible.

A thousand questions chase each other around her head. What is he doing here? Why are they hurting him?

Her voice is small and broken.

"Mike."

9. Terry Ives

Hopper's hands are folded, and he leans forward in his chair. Dustin, Lucas, and Will sit across from him, fidgeting. Karen and Nancy Wheeler stand side by side, staring at Hopper intently. Their faces are tear stained and weary.

Joyce joins them, carrying four mugs of black coffee. She sets one down in front of Hopper and offers some to Mrs. Wheeler and Nancy. They refuse.

Nobody speaks, and their thoughts are draped over the old wooden table like a cloth, heavy and dark.

"Tell me again." Mrs. Wheeler's hands are clasped together, held against her lips.

"They took Eleven. You know that, we all know that. You also know that Mike is completely head over heels for her."

"I'm pretty sure everyone in Hawkins knows that by now." Dustin interjects, rolling his eyes.

Mrs. Wheeler smiles weakly, nodding.

"So it's simple. He went after her."

Mrs. Wheeler's expression turns stony. She opens her mouth, but Nancy cuts her off.

"Where did they take her? Who are they?"

"They're Brenner's people. They're part of a government agency that specializes in foreign relations and communication. They're using her as a spy."

Mrs. Wheeler shakes her head, slamming her palm down on the table. Hop raises an eyebrow.

"They hurt my son. They *kidnapped* her. They're not government people! They're lunatics."

Hopper nods, clicking his tongue.

"I never said they're not lunatics. Anyway, they see her as their property. They think we *stole* her. They treat her like an animal, less than human." Hopper pauses, slowly pulling a cigarette from the box and placing it between his teeth.

"Essentially, she's a slave." He says, grimly.

"So what do we do?"

"Last November, the whole thing with Will and that . . . *thing* was swept under the rug. They covered it up pretty good, and closed the lab. They told the world it was some accident or something. I let them do it, because we didn't have any idea Eleven was still alive at the time. I thought if I let it go, people would forget about it and move on. I thought things would return to normal. When El showed up, I thought if we kept her home and away from prying eyes she'd be okay. I was wrong."

Hopper another drag on his cigarette. Karen Wheeler wrinkles her nose, glaring at him.

"We have enough evidence to blow the whole thing wide open. And we will, but the problem isn't that, it's Eleven. She's dangerous, and people will see her that way if word ever gets out. They'll lock her up." Hopper says, pausing to flick away some ash. The smoke floats lazily into the air, lost in the soft glow of light from the Byers' kitchen lights.

"We need to tread very carefully. If the public gets any of that footage, if word gets to the press, they'll take Eleven away for good. She'll be under lock and key for the rest of her life."

Joyce shakes her head, tears in her eyes. She hasn't been coping well with El's disappearance. She is El's unofficial adoptive mother, and they'd bonded over the months. Now, she's breaking down again, still fragile after Will's incident.

"We're going to get her back." She says, thickly.

"Yes, but carefully. If I can get my hands on her case files and all her

video footage, we'll be in the clear. The rest of story will reach the public, they'll press for imprisonment of Brenner's people. I think it would be a good idea to change her name. Get her a real identity, legally, and maybe even a family."

Joyce opens her mouth angrily, but Hopper cuts her off.

"You heard me. A family. *Her* family."

"What do you mean?"

Hopper raises an eyebrow, smiling widely. It doesn't reach his eyes.

"Do you remember Terry Ives?"

10. Mouse

"Well this is all fine and dandy, but what about *Mike*?" Karen Wheeler snaps, hands on her hips. She's shaking with anger, eyes narrowed menacingly.

"*Mom!*" Nancy hisses, angrily.

"What? No, I get that Eleven is gone, but we've all seen what she can do. She can handle herself.

My son is missing, and I don't know where he is, or if he's safe, or . . ." She trails off, bursting into tears. Joyce bites her lip, hands shaking. Nancy embraces her mom. Hopper stares into the table.

"Boys, do you have any idea where Mike could've gone?"

Lucas shakes his head.

"No. When we last saw him he was kinda, er . . ."

"Acting like a complete idiot with a stick up his butt." Dustin interjects.

Hopper stares at him, incredulous. Lucas bites his lip.

"Yeah. He was sorta pissed. He kept talking about finding Eleven. We didn't think he'd actually go after her. At least not alone . . ." Lucas stares into his lap, concern etched across his face.

"Mike didn't know for sure where they took her, but he had a place to start." Will points out.

"We have officers looking everywhere around there, as we speak. He's not there." Hopper says. Karen sniffs, loudly. Nancy's eyes are full of tears.

"He must've found something that led him on the trail."

"But what?"

Hopper stares out of the window, taking a long pull on his cigarette.

"I don't know. I don't know . . ."

The human mind is a complex thing. A labyrinth.

It changes like water. A rippling, frothing mass. It's twisted and gnarled, full of shadows and corners. It's got barriers and walls. It is beautiful. It is dangerous. It is so incredibly easy to get lost within it.

Dustin reacts as she expects him to. He pushes her out.

It is an unconscious action. His barriers react to the invasion the way they should. They fight her, and she doesn't push him.

It confirms her suspicions. Mike is special, and the thread that connects them is unlike anything else.

Her heart sinks. It will be harder to get through to them. She must be careful. If she tries to go any farther, it might hurt him. It might hurt her.

Invasion of the mind is certainly not child's play.

. . .

She watches Mike deteriorate. It tears her apart. She scarcely takes her eyes off the screen. When he bleeds, she breaks.

At least she can talk to him. The night they brought him here, she got through to him. She took down her barriers and spoke. On screen, his face lit up. The sight brought tears to her eyes.

They exchange small thoughts. Words of men do not bother him again for a long time. He receives food, he sleeps, he tries to reassure her.

It doesn't last very long.

El is taken from the room, dragged out by the arms. She's already lost the weight she gained back in those months where she was eating like a queen at the Byers' household.

They take her to the usual tiled room, handcuffed and blindfolded. The blindfold comes off. A small, metal cage containing a single white mouse sits at the edge of the table. She swallows, already feeling her pulse quicken.

The men face her behind a thick, glass wall. Guns in hand, faces stoic and unyielding.

"Kill it."

Apparently, they are past the falsely friendly introductions.

"No."

"I'm going to ask you again, Eleven." One of them says, his tone is nonchalant.

"Kill it."

"No."

The man makes his way across the room, still behind glass. He types something on keyboard. El peers at him curiously.

The little screen on the opposite wall, usually blank, brightens. El realizes the picture on the screen is the surveillance of Mike's cell. Her breath catches in her throat. She watches fearfully as the door on the video opens and three men burst into the room. They begin to beat him. She watches, horrified and frozen, as they bury their fists into his body. He falls, fists swinging out in a futile attempt to protect himself.

"Stop it!" She screams, looking at the men behind glass.

"Stop. You're hurting him. Please, stop this right now!" Tears roll down her cheeks. Her hands tremble.

The man regards her calmly, almost amused.

"Let him go!" She crossing some line of hysteria, tugging at the cuffs, screaming relentlessly.

"Eleven. Kill the mouse. Kill it, or they'll beat him until there is nothing left."

She stares at them helplessly, still trembling. Everything inside her is frozen. Everything screams inside her head, her breath is lodged in her chest.

"Kill it."

Desperately, she tries to focus her mind on the task. Mike's cries and the thud of knuckles on flesh invade her senses, paralyzing her.

"Now."

The mouse begins to scream, darting frantically around the cage. Her breath comes in gasps. She feels as if she is suffocating.

She focuses her energy on it, like a metal fist, squeezing its tiny heart. The creature curls into a ball, trembling violently before falling still. On the screen, a battered and bleeding boy slumps to the floor, unconscious.

11. Promise?

She is returned to her cell. She falls to the floor, hitting her chin on the tiles. She doesn't get up, letting the tears choke her.

Mike is a weapon against her. They know she'll cooperate to save him. It's despicable. It's genius.

Eleven has no other option. She will do as they say. She will become their slave.

. . .

She stands in a cellar. A single lamp lights the musty place. Two men are bent low, whispering. She struggles to make out the words, creeping closer. Their language is foreign, but she repeats what she hears. She does as she is told.

When again, she resurfaces, the bad men are crowded around a computer screen, eyebrows knit.

One of them looks up suddenly, as if noticing her for the first time.

"That'll do, Eleven."

She will return to that cellar once again. She will watch as one man kills the other, burying a shard of glass deep into his abdomen. She will watch the light leave his eyes

Mike hears her when the throbbing in his head lessens for a moment. His muscles ache. His heartbeat is too fast.

Her voice is rough around the edges. Her thoughts are sharp and fragmented. She is near, and she is dying. At the same time, she's trying to save him. He wishes she wouldn't. He's not worth it.

She's back in the metal chair. Mike is back on screen. The handcuffs break. The glass wall shatters. Six men die. She barely has the strength to rise from the chair, but she does. Their radios belch static.

She fiddles with the controls, panicked. She closes her eyes, forcing herself to reach into the radio. Her thoughts magnify.

Several miles away, all four walkie talkies hum to life.

"Dustin. Will. Lucas." Will cannot believe his ears. He whirls around, grabbing the walkie talkie.

"El? El, is that you? It's Will." He says, tripping over his words.

"Yes." She gasps.

"Are you okay? Where are you?"

"Will, I can't talk long. I'm .. trapped. There's bad men. Papa's men. They took me. Mike is here ... with me. He's hurt. We're in a bad place. It's called...Exploratorium..."

The static overwhelms her voice for a moment.

"Exploratorium? You mean the science museum?"

"Yes." She says. Will can hear the strain in her voice.

"Alright. El.. listen to me. We're coming. We're going to get you out of there."

"Okay. Be ... c-careful." Her voice wavers. Then static. Will's fingers shake as he changes the channel.

"Dustin, Lucas, do you copy?"

"Yeah, dude. What's up?" Dustin replies.

"It's Eleven. Her voice just came through the Super Com. Guys, she's in trouble. She said Mike is with her."

"What? How? Where are they?"

"She said something about the Exploratorium."

"The museum? That's really far from here."

"I know. We need to tell Hopper."

"I'm on it. Over and out."

Will sets the walkie talkie down and barrels down the hall. Joyce raises her eyebrows as he almost crashes into her. The words burst from his mouth.

"It's El. She can talk through the walkie talkie. She's at the Exploratorium in Delta Point. Remember, we had a field trip there?"

Joyce blinks in surprise.

"What?"

Will looks around, helpless.

"You should probably call Hopper."

She is punished for what she did. They go after Mike. She watches as they beat him to a bloody pulp. When they leave, she reaches for him.

Mike.

No response.

Mike.

A faint stir. He raises his hand to his freshly broken nose. His fingers travel down to his swollen cheek and then to his collarbone, to his ribs. He coughs into his hand. It comes away slick with thick, dark blood. Eleven begins to cry, for him. She can't stop herself.

Mike.

El.

I'm sorry. It's my fault. It's my fault they do this to you.

On the screen, the dying boy's face twists into a grimace. He tries and fails to stand up.

Don't you ever say that. Don't you ever say that it's your fault. It's not.

El is silent. Mike begins to cry, but his voice is angry and the tears that mix with the blood on his face are beautiful.

I'm going to make sure every single one of those bastards is locked up for what they're doing to you, El. I'm gonna get you out of here.

Mike-

No. Listen to me, El. El, are you listening? It is not your fault. You're going to get out of here, and you are going to live a long life and you're going to get a driver's license and go to the movies. You're gonna grow up and get a job or travel. You're going to marry somebody and have kids and be happy. El, I can't lose you again.

Even in his thoughts, she can hear the tears. She thinks she wants to die. She thinks she loves him.

Mike. No. No more. I don't deserve it, Mike.

Because she doesn't. She doesn't deserve to be happy. Not when she's hurt so many. Not when she's hurt him. She doesn't deserve him, either.

The resignation in her voice scares him. Her words are empty and unfeeling. She's given up. He shakes his head furiously.

No. You deserve to be happy, El. You do. Don't you believe anything else. Don't believe what they tell you. You deserve to be happy.

She snaps. Though he cannot see her, he feels the pain explode inside of her. He steels himself as he recognizes that thing again. That other, throbbing, bursting emotion. He's felt it on his own, too. Plenty of times.

When she broke Troy's arm. When he found her, dying in the snow. When her tears in his Super Com woke him at three in the morning. When she fell asleep curled into his side halfway through that boring movie Nancy made them watch. When she blushed after he kissed her a second time, right on the tip of the nose. When he found her

suffocating in a closet. When her snowball hit him square in the face and she laughed at him for hours afterward. When she jumped into the lake with him on a freezing October morning.

Promise?

Mike laughs through the tears.

"Promise."

12. The Rescue Mission

"This is bullshit."

"Agreed."

"Mike's our friend."

"So is Eleven."

"They just left without us!"

"This is bullshit."

"What are we gonna do?"

Dustin throws up his hands in frustration, peering out the window as Hopper's car whips out of sight. He, along with several officers, had set off in the direction of the Exploratorium. Hopper had responded immediately to Joyce's call, arriving a mere hour later with a team of special agents equipped with high grade weapons and cameras.

They were going to blow the whole thing wide open, and they'd smile as the whole thing collapsed and fell around them. The news would get out. The remaining people still working for Brenner would be interrogated and locked up.

"We can't just stand here!" Lucas says, angrily. Dustin and Will nod their heads.

"Let's go. We gotta follow them."

"How?"

"Anybody know how to drive?"

. . .

"Shut up, Dustin!" Lucas grips the wheel tightly, eyes roving over the dashboard. Dustin, sitting in the passenger seat, is leaning over, pointing at the different controls.

"Dude, calm down. I totally know how to drive. I think it's . . . that one." Lucas slams his foot down. Jonathan's car lurches forward.

"Woah." Will says, gripping their head rests. "Careful."

"Maybe go a bit . . . slower."

"Ya think?" Lucas growls, taking a deep breath.

"Brace yourselves."

Lucas puts his foot on the gas, slower this time. They begin to move down the road.

"Okay, okay. Here we go."

He accelerates, glancing nervously behind him. They make it a couple miles without many problems. When they get into the busier part of Hawkins, Lucas starts to freak out. His breathing quickens, his palms sweaty on the wheel.

"Dude, we're totally breaking the law right now."

"Who cares? Just drive."

"Shut up."

They take another turn, painfully slow.

"Do we even know where they went?"

Will rummages around until he pulls out a paper map.

"Okay, um, the Exploratorium is in Delta Point. Two hours away. This says . . . to get on the highway. The turn is right here. Stop!" Will says. Lucas brakes, hard, then turns. They make their way onto the highway clumsily. Somebody honks behind them.

"We're in deep shit, guys." Dustin says nervously, glancing out his window.

"Shut up, I need to concentrate." Lucas groans. Will reaches over and turns on the radio, grinning as "Should I Stay or Should I Go" comes

on.

"We've heard this song like a million times, Will." Dustin groans.

"Who cares?"

"I care. It's getting annoying."

"Shut up."

All there is to do is wait, for Will. That's what she does. She sleeps a lot. Mike continues to talk to her, reminding her to hold on. She wants to let go. She really does, but she remembers Will's promise and Mike's promise and tries to hold on. She tries.

They drag her into that godforsaken room once more. She relays the messages they send her to find. She talks to foreign men and repeats their strange tongues and strange secrets whispered in the dead of night. She grits her teeth and wipes the blood from her nose as the bad men praise her and send her away.

And she waits.

Mike hears the gunshots through his sleep. He wakes, opening his eyes blearily. His whole body is overcome with pain for a moment. He coughs again, pushing himself upright. The gunshots continue. He hears shouting, even through the thick walls.

They're here.

Mike is startled by her, even though he should be used to it by now. The thought is so clear, as if she's standing right next to him, speaking into his ear.

Who?

Hopper. They're here to save us, Mike.

He should feel relief. All he feels is a distant, dull disbelief.

El's presence ceases for a moment. He pulls himself up, walking aimlessly around the cell, running his palms over the tiles. His own, dried blood is stained there. It flakes away, adding to the red already building up under his fingernails.

More gunshots. Mike Wheeler returns to his corner, letting his head fall into his hands.

"We're here."

He says it aloud, his voice cracking from inuse.

Her cell door is thrown open. Two men, armed with guns, handcuff her and usher her out into the hallway. She is pushed along, sliding on sock feet.

The gunshots are louder here, and the shouting abrasive. She wonders if people are dead. Her stomach sinks as she thinks of Will and Dustin and Lucas. And Mike. Oh, God, Mike.

"Move faster, bitch." The gun is cold between her shoulder blades. She forces herself to take steady breaths. She must wait until the time is right.

They force her through double doors and down a flight of considering the most efficient way to incapacitate her captors.

It happens fast. As she turns the corner, she comes face to face with the Chief. Hopper, red faced and flustered, stops and raises his gun.

Both men fall to the ground, immediately stilled as their necks break. El feels the energy rush out of her. The room spins, and she instinctively slumps against the wall. Hopper places his hands on her shoulders.

"Eleven." He says. She can hear the smile in his voice.

"Eleven, you're safe now. We're gonna get you home." He sheaths his gun and helps her as they continue down the hall.

She lets him help her, suddenly weak and dizzy. As they continue,

she remembers Mike.

"Mike." She says.

"Hopper, what about Mike? He's not safe." She says, suddenly panicked. She pushes against his arms, which suddenly ensnare her too tightly.

"We'll get him, El."

"No. Now. No, he's in trouble."

Without thinking, she pushes out of his grasp, barreling down the hall. She dodges another body sprawled in the hallway and takes the stairs two at a time, descending to the lowest floor. She uses her mind to guide her, making the connection stronger, pushing her boundaries. He's close.

13. A Promise Kept

As the gunshots and yelling continue, Mike grows jittery. He paces the walls, obsessively searching for a way out. Of course, the door won't budge. He's tried it all before.

"Hey!" He yells. His voice cracks, and he's seized with a fit of coughing.

"I'm here. In here, hey! Help!" His voice is weak and ragged.

"Help!"

There is no answer.

Lucas pulls the car away from the highway, into the Exploratorium parking lot. He takes a deep breath. Dustin and Will look at him, excitement and fear smeared in their eyes. He gives them a small nod.

"Let's go."

They pass a large sign with red lettering. It reads: *CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC FOR CONSTRUCTION UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE*

Dustin snorts.

"Yeah, right."

Lucas readjusts the strap of his pack, pulling out his arm slinger.

They find the front door locked, and start around toward the back. The sound of gunfire is sparse, but near.

Dustin recoils, and Will looks unsure.

"C'mon guys. It's for Mike and El. We need to do this." Lucas says. They exchanged glasses. Will brings himself to his full height, taking a deep breath.

"You're right."

The back door is open, ajar. Lucas pushes it open, peering down the tiles hallway. Quietly, they make their way down, turning the corner. The gunfire grows louder as they make their way down a narrow flight of stairs. They push open the glass double doors and start into the next hallway, rounding a corner.

Lucas finds himself face to face with the cold, steel muzzle of a gun.

"Mike." Her voice is muffled through the thick steel door that separates them. Mike runs to it, pounding on it with his fists.

"El! El, is that you?"

"Mike, stand back." She says. He does as he is told, heart racing.

Suddenly, there's the sound of heavy footsteps.

"Eleven. Step away from the door. We're done playing games." A man's voice. Mike's breath hitches in his throat.

He hears the heavy thud of a bodies hitting the floor. Then silence.

"El?" Mike says. He feels like his lungs are being squeezed into a metal tube. He cannot breath.

"El?"

The horrible squeal of metal feels his ears. He cups his hand over them. The hinges shatter, and the door collapses to the ground.

El stands in the doorway. He holds his breath. Thick, dark blood streams from her nose and ears. In the white light, her face is bathed in shadow. Her face is sunken in, her eyes dull and dark. She sways, the life seemingly sucked out of her.

Mike springs to his feet, losing the time and space between them. They crash into each other, clinging to one another's tattered, bloodied clothes. She slumps against him and they fall to the ground. She's sobbing, and the fat tears that stain her cheeks soak through his

shirt in seconds.

"It's okay." He says, failing to suppress his own, pitiful sobs that spring from aching lungs.

"It's okay. You're safe. I'm safe. We're gonna be okay."

Her fingers touch the bruises that blossom on his face and neck. Her thumb traces the cuts on his swollen lip. He wipes the blood off her face with shaking fingers.

"It's okay." He says, again, still trembling.

"It's okay."

14. The Blackness of Blood

"Can you stand?"

Eleven nods. Mike helps her to his feet, wincing as his bruised ribs and aching muscles protest. She leans heavily against him, one hand in his and the other around his waist. He gazes at her paling face and empty eyes, breathing her in.

"We have to find Hopper, El." He says. She nods.

"I'm so dizzy." She says weakly. Her eyelids flutter.

"No, El. Hold on a bit longer. When we get home, you can sleep for a week."

"Okay."

As they round the corner, Mike freezes. Three men hold Will, Lucas, and Dustin by the arms, guns pressed to the sides of their heads. His mind reels. Heavy fear settles in the pit of his stomach.

What are they doing here?

"Make a move and they die." The man glares at them. His mouth sags in an ugly smirk.

Mike's grip around El's shoulders tightens. He swallows hard. Dustin's eyes are filled with tears. The sight sets his whole being on fire. The fear is real. Blinding.

El's body tenses. The bad men let go, hands suddenly fumbling at their throats as if some invisible force is choking them.

"She's pulling a Darth Vader on these sons of bitches!" Dustin yells, scrambling away. Mike barely pauses to look at the nightmarish sight before them, and turns to face El, searching her face.

"El!" Panic chokes him. Her head lolls, and he can practically feel the strength leave her. She becomes a rag doll in his arms, lifeless.

"Is she okay?" Dustin says, running over to them. On the ground, the men fall still.

"No. She used too much energy, she's not strong enough. We have to get her out of here." He looks around at his friends, desperate.

He gathers her up in his arms and makes to stand. She stirs slightly, mumbling, curling her fingers into his shirt and holding fast.

He hears a sharp exhale behind him and turns, in time to see another one of Brenner's minions burst through a door to their left. He watches in horror as Will moves toward him. He hears the unmistakable click of the gun.

Mike doesn't think.

Mike's shoulder connects with Will's ribs as he throws his weight against his friend. He doesn't hear the shot, only the pain that explodes in his leg a fraction of a second later. Mike slides across the tiled floor as he falls, eyes stinging, all breath stolen from his lungs. His vision dims and everything blurs together. His fingers fumble over the wet, dark hole in his leg. The burning sensation leaks into his blood, sets his nerves on fire.

The worst part is the silence, and the fear. He squints, hands pressed over the wound. His blood squeezes through the spaces between his fingers.

Mike feels as if he has a thousand hearts, beating in his head, in his fingertips, in the bullet wound in his leg.

His gaze meets Eleven, who lies sprawled on the tiles, inches from him. Vaguely, he can feel the gentle pressure of her fingers still clutching his shirt. She is barely conscious.

Blairily, Mike gazes, quite fascinated, as the pool of blood around him grows larger. It's so *dark*. So hot and sticky and unrelenting as it flows out of the wound with every throb of his heart.

He can hear distant voices and someone's fractured scream before he slumps forward into the blackness of his own blood.

Some hours later, El will wake in the backseat of a Hawkins police car. Hopper will smile around the cigarette in his mouth as he glances at her in his rear-view mirror.

Joyce will cling to her and dissolve into hysterical sobs that don't stop for a long time. Jonathan will embrace her, patting her on the shoulder reassuringly as she shatters on the front porch.

She'll ask for Mike. Hopper will explain the seriousness of his injury. He'll leave out just how big the pool of blood really was before they found him. She will flee the room, obeying the only instinct she really knows. She'll run. She will lock herself in the hallway closet, relishing in the darkness and suffocation. She deserves the punishment.

15. The Second Longest Drive and Some Fabric

A/N: Two chapters in one day, because the length (or lack thereof) of the previous one doesn't seem fair. A BIG thank you to all of my faithful reviewers. Your feedback on every chapter is helpful and quite inspiring. Enjoy!

The trip back to Hawkins is possibly one of the longest he's ever experienced. It is surpassed by only one other, but he'd rather not dwell on it.

The girl lies sprawled across the backseat. Her eyes are closed, her brow slightly furrowed. Her hands, bloodied and dirty, are curled around a ripped piece of blue fabric. Fabric from the Wheeler boy's shirt. They found her like that, clinging to him. Hopper shudders at the memory, so fresh in his mind.

She literally had to be ripped away from him.

There was blood. So much of it. It leaked from the wound in his leg and it leaked from her ears. It spread out around them on the white tiles, a shocking red.

One hand on the wheel, he fumbles for a cigarette, shoving it between his teeth. He doesn't have a light, at least not within reach.

In the rear-view mirror, he looks at the girl they call bruises on her face, and the shadows staining the skin under her eyes make him shiver.

He tries not to think of the other little girl who was once a constant in his life. Until she wasn't. His attempt fails, of course. Every damn thing comes back to Sarah.

They are both so small, fragile as glass.

He returns his gaze to the road ahead. His thoughts wander to the Wheeler boy and the ambulance racing against time, somewhere ahead of them.

The girl begins to toss and turn, whimpering a little. Her eyes flutter open .

Hopper can't help it. A smile breaks across his face. He supposes he is just glad to see her, conscious and well. Not well, but alive. At least she is alive.

When she sees him, she relaxes a little, still struggling to cling to consciousness.

Her hands unfurl. The bloodstained fabric falls onto her chest. Her eyes fill with tears, and she opens her mouth to ask the question he dreads answering.

16. We Can't All Be Heroes

White.

White sheets. He registers the roughness of them on his sore skin. His fingers trace circles on them. They're too clean. Alien.

White lights. They make his head spin.

White tiles. He can imagine the blackness of blood. He can still smell his own fear.

His fingers move past the sheets, to the place on his leg where Brenner's bullet tore a hole in it. The wound is heavily bandaged. There are more bandages, wrapped around his ribcage. He feels them under the hospital gown. The cuts on his face where the bad men's knuckles split skin are stitched. There's an IV in his right arm. His fingers fumble over it, and his head spins. Carefully, he rests his head back against the pillows, his thoughts growing fuzzy.

He is alone, and he's glad for it. Sleep overcomes him, and he gives in.

When he awakes, a nurse stands by his bedside.

"How're you feeling, Honey?" She says, marking something on a clipboard.

"Eleven." He says, groggily. The fractured memory of it all rushes back, like a punch in the stomach.

"What happened?" He says, tripping over his words. The meds they're giving him are strong. It doesn't help him. The nurse looks at him in surprise.

"Sorry?"

"What happened?" His voice gains strength. He sits up. Immediately, her hand is on his shoulder, forcing him back down.

"No. You're a thirteen year old survivor of a gunshot wound. You

have experienced severe blood loss. You are starved and weak. You need rest." She says, forcefully. He continues to struggle.

"Honey, I'm gonna tell your family that you're awake. How's that sound?"

Mike nods, slumping back against his pillow.

"That would be wonderful."

. . .

"Mrs. Wheeler?"

El sits up as the nurse opens the door to the waiting room. Mike's mother is jerked from sleep, blinking in surprise.

"Mrs. Wheeler?" The nurse says again.

"Yes?"

"Your son is awake. Visitors welcome. He'll see you now."

El jumps to her feet. Dustin prods her elbow, grinning. She returns his smile and takes his arm, pulling him down the ICU hallway. The door bursts open seconds before she reaches it. She bites her lip, glancing nervously around. She should be conscious of things like this, especially here, in such a public place. But right now, she cannot contain herself.

She reaches Mike first. He grins when he sees her, moves his hand to touch her cheek. She just shakes her head and throws her arms around him, laughing and crying all at once.

"El." He says softly, leaning his cheek against the top of her head. She can feel his breath in her ear. Though the pressure on his ribs nearly kills him, his arms encircle her, holding fast.

"Mike."

"You weren't worried about me, were you? It takes more than a bullet to defeat Mike Wheeler."

She giggles tearfully, taking his hand in both of hers.

"Yeah, right. You know you're like the biggest dumbass ever to walk the Earth, right?"

"Good to see you too, Lucas." Mike says, rolling his eyes. Lucas rushes forward to hug his friend.

"Careful, now!" The nurse snaps, hovering over them.

Dustin and Will shove their way forward, each embracing Mike. Will grins at him.

"You saved me."

"I guess so. Yeah."

Will rolls his eyes.

"So modest, Wheeler. We can't all be heroes."

"Who says?"

17. Lucky

El traces the bruises, starting with the ones that pattern his forehead. She works her way down, to the black and blue that adorns his collar bone. He's been slipping in and out of consciousness ever since she was first allowed into see him.

She sits, motionless and unyielding, by his bedside. The hospital evokes steely memories of the white tiled corridors and dark corners of Brenner's lab, but she suffers through it. Anything to be here, with him.

The various monitors and beeping machines gaze blankly at the pair of them. El watches his heart beat on the screen and forces herself to take a breath. He's alive. The doctors say he's going to get better.

Softly, her fingers find the bandages bound tightly around his left leg, just above the knee. The bleeding has stopped. El places her palm over the wound, closes her eyes. She feels him, in a thousand ways. She can't really explain it. Not out loud.

She feels the wound throbbing beneath her fingers. She feels his subconscious and his energy like dimmed splashes of color behind her eyelids and in her skin.

The medicine blurs it all together, eliminating the sharp edges. For a moment, she allows herself to sink.

A nurse barges through the door, startling El out of her reverie. The woman steals a worried glance at her own bruises, at her thinness. She tries to cover it up by giving El a small smile. El tugs at the collar of her sweater, suddenly very conscious of the places on her skin where their fists left marks.

Despite Joyce's protests, Hopper insisted on keeping her out of the hospital records. For her own safety, and because she doesn't have a legal identity. On paper, El does not exist.

The nurse approaches the bedside and bends over one of the monitors, noting something down on her clipboard.

"Is he your brother?"

El shakes her head.

"Friend."

The nurse nods.

"Your friend was awfully lucky, hon."

El nods again, watching the woman's hand as it whizzes across the paper. After a few minutes, she leaves, letting the door swing shut behind her.

She takes a breath, turning her attention back to Mike. She resists the urge to brush a strand of hair out of his eyes. Instead, she scoots forward in her chair, wrapping her fingers around his wrist. His pulse pushes against her fingers. It is a constant reminder. He's alive. He's going to get better.

She has to tell herself again and again.

Under her hand, his body tenses. His eyes dart underneath the eyelids.

"Mike."

His open, land on her. He gives her a sleepy smile.

"El."

Her hand moves from his wrist to his fingers. He grips her hand tightly, struggles to sit up.

"Mike, don't." She says, putting a hand on his shoulder. He slumps back, wincing. His eyes sweep the hospital room.

"They keep saying you were lucky, Mike." She tells him, quietly.

"I don't feel lucky." He grumbles. His words slur together.

"Mike." She says again, and suddenly all the fear that's been bottled up inside her shows itself. She can't stop the tears, and they're fat and

hot and sticky. She lets go of his hand to wipe her nose on her sleeve. Mike's brow furrows.

"El, what's wrong?"

She just shakes her head, embarrassed and infuriated all at once.

"Just, just you and I c-could've lost y-you and you a-almost died and, and . . ."

They're the kind of tears that ugly and ridiculous and uncontrollable. Her cheeks are flushed and blotchy, and her nose continues to run.

Mike puts a hand on her back and pushes her toward him, so her head rests in the crook of his neck. She bites her lip to keep the tears at bay, squeezing her eyes shut. If the pressure is hurting him, he doesn't show it, only moves his arm so it encircles her shoulders.

"I'm okay." He says, quietly.

"You're not okay." She says, after awhile.

"You're alive."

"Well, yeah . . ." He says.

"You're not okay, either."

She laughs a little, because the whole thing is so ridiculous and all she really wants to do is stay here, with him.

Comfortable silence stretches between them. El calms down. And there's just the sound of his breathing and the beeping of the monitors. Her eyelids grow heavy, and she moves her head to get a look at his face. He's slipped into a syrupy slumber again, his cheek still leaning against the top of her head.

. . .

Joyce finds them like that a half hour later. She resists the urge to snap a picture, gently shaking El awake. El blushes, detaches herself from Mike Wheeler, and follows the older woman out the door. Joyce

wiggles her eyebrows at the girl, but doesn't say anything. She's grateful.

El clings to Mike's arm as he practices walking with crutches around the hospital. It's been a little over a week, and he managed to escape the wheelchair only yesterday.

He was extremely lucky. The bullet went through the top of his thigh, avoiding bone and all the major arteries and nerves. Even so, the confinement is driving him crazy. El is the only thing keeping him sane.

They make their rounds. Mike winces with every movement, but he's getting stronger.

"Any plans for when I get outta this place?" Mike asks her. She smiles.

"Eggos and D&D?" She suggests, laughing. He sighs, dropping his eyelids, exaggerating his words.

"Sounds lovely."

They round the corner, continuing on in comfortable silence. Mike's mind races. It is only a matter of time before they come for her again, right? They'd heard next to nothing from Hopper. For all he knows, El remains in danger.

He studies her face, eyes traveling from the bridge of her nose to her big, dark eyes and the circles under them from no sleep. She catches him staring, her lip twitches. When he almost collides head-on with an unoccupied hospital bed she can barely contain her laughter. His ears redden.

...

He is released from the hospital a week later. He hobbles along the rain-soaked pavement on crutches. El keeps her hand on his shoulder. She bites her tongue, gazing at his pained, twisted face. His forehead glistens with sweat. When he realizes she's watching him, he forces a smile.

"I'm okay." He says quickly.

"Mike." She says, narrowing her eyes. He shrugs.

"You know, there's something I don't understand." He says.

"What?"

"When you contacted me with the walkie, you told me you were in Riverside."

Eleven's forehead wrinkles. Her mind reels.

"What are you talking about?"

"A week after they took you, you called me. You called for me, told me you were in Riverside. That's where I went. That's where they found me."

"I never called for you, Mike." She says, slowly. Heat rises in her cheeks. Those kniving, evil bastards . . .

"That doesn't make sense." He says.

"It makes perfect sense." She whispers, stopping suddenly.

"What?"

He trips on a crack in the sidewalk and one of his crutches clatters to the ground. She's there before he has time to fall, supporting his weight, throwing his arm around her shoulders.

"It makes perfect sense, Mike! They knew you'd answer me. They found a way send you a fake message. They probably pieced together my voice from old recordings. They knew you'd come. They led you straight into a trap, Mike." She says, through her teeth.

"You really are a dumbass." She says, remembering Lucas' little quip back in the hospital.

Mike grins.

"Your vocabulary has improved."

"Mouthbreather."

"You amaze me."

. . .

El accompanies him on the ride home from the hospital. When they reach his house, El grabs his hand and squeezes it.

"Get some rest, okay?"

"Okay."

Mike's mom helps him up the steps to his room, ordering him into bed. She presses two pills into his palm and tells him to go to sleep. He doesn't need to be persuaded.

. . .

El rides her bike to Mike's house every morning. The particular day is dressed in thick fog. It's draped over everything, like silk.

They're in his room. Mike sits with one leg folded, and his wounded one stretched out. He pours over his math textbook, gnawing on the end of his pencil. Every so often he'll start cursing under his breath, eyebrows furrowed in apparent frustration.

El is stretched out on her stomach at the foot of his bed, legs swinging absentmindedly as she wolfs down a sandwich. She flips through a huge stack of pictures, giggling every so often. When Mike realizes the sound of her chewing has stopped, he looks up. She's watching him intently, eyes wide.

"What?" He says, defensively.

"You look terrible." She says, matter-of-factly. He raises his eyebrows.

"Thanks, I'm flattered." His voice drips with sarcasm.

She snorts, taking another bite of her sandwich. He returns to his textbook, steeling a glance at her sleepy smile. He realizes they're right. Those nurses. He's incredibly lucky.

Just another day at the Wheeler household, early November, 1984.

18. The Burning of Case Files

Hopper visits El at the Byers' house. He sits across from her at the kitchen table, lighting his cigarette clumsily. He pushes a small cardboard box toward her. She lifts the lid. The contents are peculiar. She fingers through a couple file folders, eyes roving over the typed words and elaborate stamps. There are tapes, too, and other little devices. She looks at him, opening her mouth.

"Evidence." He says, before she can ask any questions.

"Evidence?"

"All your case files. All the recordings. Everything. Even the surveillance camera footage. It's all right here. Your secret is safe, El. They're not gonna come after you."

She feels a smile creeping onto her lips.

"This is all of it?"

"Everything. I wanted to give you a choice. You decide if you want to keep it."

"No." El says, quickly.

"Alright. I thought you might say that." He smiles, taking a long pull on his cigarette.

"I might have a better idea."

...

They gather near Castle Byers. Joyce has strung pretty lights around the trees. A pizza and plate of cookies sits on a tree stump, and Dustin indulges himself, grinning from ear to ear. Mike, Will, and Lucas discuss the next D&D campaign intently, but soon, their conversation turns to school and the amount of work Mike has to make up. El stands with them, wearing Will's old Hawkins Middle School sweatshirt. She's smiling. Mike glances at her and smiles too, patting her shoulder.

"I don't think I've seen you smile like that in, like, forever." He says.

She doesn't respond, watching Hopper as he bends over a small pile of wood, cursing under the breath.

Mike puts an arm around her. She leans into him.

She told him what Hopper told her. They had the evidence, which meant the FBI wasn't going to lock in some high security government prison. They weren't going to study her like they did E.T. She was safe. She was here, and she was happy.

That's all that matters.

Hopper steps away as flames spring up. He rubs his hand together.

"Alright, El. Care to do the honors?"

She steps forward and takes the box from Hopper with shaking fingers. She steps up to the flames, feeling the heat against her skin. She closes her eyes for a moment.

The first folder burns quickly, obliterated by the flame. It blackens and shrivels. El breathes for the first time in a thousand years. Mike takes her hand. Together, they toss the tapes and files into the fire, smiling at the beauty of the destruction. One by one, her chains break.

The flames lick at the contents of the box, and ash floats into the bitter air. She gazes across the fire at Hopper and the boys. A surge of gratitude swells inside of her. Her eyes well with tears.

"Thank you." She chokes. Mike presses his cheek against her cheek. She can feel his smile.

"You're free."

. . . .

Hopper touches her shoulder. She turns. He holds out sheet of paper.

She takes it.

"An identity. I had to pull some strings, but I got it."

Her fingers begin to tremble. On the page, the name Eleanor Jane Ives stares her in the face. Her mouth opens and closes again, words suddenly stolen from her.

"You exist now, El!" Dustin yells, suddenly.

"She always existed, Dustin." Mike snaps. She glances between their faces. Her lips tremble, dripping with a teary smile as bright as the sun.

She embraces Hopper, clinging to his shirt.

"Thank you." She breathes, because he can never know how much this means to her.

Mike takes the paper from her, eyes scanning it.

"Ives?" He says. Hopper clears his throat. He looks El in the eyes, giving her a small smile. She holds her breath.

"There's something you should know."

19. Jane

Mike stands beside her on the front porch, holding her hand. She's nervous and jittery. She's convinced he's the only thing keeping her there. Hopper and Joyce stand on either side. Joyce knocks, a little hesitantly, tears in her eyes.

"Yeah?" Becky appears in the doorway. Her eyebrows raise as her eyes land on Hopper.

"Fancy meeting you again, Chief." She says. "Whatever it is, I didn't do it."

Hopper gives a sharp bark of laughter, though it is somewhat lacking in humor.

"Is your sister home?"

"Yeah. I thought I told you, she ain't telling anybody nothing." Hopper shakes his head.

"This is Eleven." He says, putting his arm around El. El gives the woman a small smile.

"Hello." She says, holding out her hand. El uses her free hand to take it.

"Did you say Eleven, like the number?" She says. Hopper nods.

"You can also call her Jane." Becky stares at El with renewed intensity, her hands flying to her mouth.

"What did you say?"

"Like I said, is your sister home?"

. . .

The woman in the chair gazes at her, distant. Her eyes possess a faraway look that El finds quite unsettling. Becky tries to introduce them, but trips over her words.

"Terry. C'mon. I-I don't know what to say. You were right." Becky says, a little tearfully. She's shaken, her face pale.

"You were right. Your baby came home, Ter. You were right."

Becky continues speaking, softly

"You were right." She repeats the words over and over again.

The woman remains silent.

El lets go of Mike, stepping closer to her.

"Mom?" She says. The word is foreign, strange on her tongue.

Terry Ives doesn't react. Tears stream down Joyce' face. Mike holds his breath, hatred for Brenner overcoming him.

El comes closer. It is not words that bring Terry Ives from her mental prison. It's Eleven's touch. She grabs her mother's hand.

"Mom?"

Terry Ives turns, takes in El's face. Mike sees the clouds of darkness leave the woman's eyes. A flicker of recognition crosses her face.

El's breath hitches. She feels as if she's choking.

"Mom. It's me. It's Jane."

Terry Ives begins to cry, guttural noises of shock and relief escape her lips. Her hands clumsily brush back El's short hair. They embrace and fall on the floor, rocking back and forth, sobbing into one another.

"Jane." Terry says, burying her face in her daughter's hair.

"Call me El."

***** **End** *****

A/N: First, thank you to anyone who took the time to read and review. Your critique, advice, and compliments are all extremely

encouraging. I want to continue this story, but if I continue to fuss with it I will not be doing it justice. I have given it all the love it needs. I will be posting more from the Stranger Things universe in the near future. Prompts and suggestions welcome. Thank you!